

IPRI Conflict Weekly

Research | Review | Forecast

A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world

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Anti-Separatism bill in France, Protests in Nepal against a gender-specific law, Surge in targeted killings in Afghanistan, and Instability continues in Ethiopia

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Outrage over new proposed law in Nepal wherein women under 40 years of age would have to seek consent to travel. (Image Source: Kathmandu Post)

France: Lower House approves Macron's anti-separatism bill in a pledge to fight Islamic extremism

In the news

On 16 February, the lower house of the French National Assembly approved the “Respect for the Principles and Values of the Republic” or the ‘anti-separatism’ bill brought by President Emmanuel Macron to fight Islamic radicalism and defend the republic. The lower house dominated by Macron’s centrist La République En Marche party, voted 347 to 151 in favour of the bill. It will now be put to vote in the conservative-led upper house or the Senate where it is expected to approve. “It’s an extremely strong secular offensive. It’s a tough text...but necessary for the republic,” said Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin to RTL radio ahead of the vote.

Issues at large

First, the bill in brief. The bill, once enacted as a law, will impose measures such as sanctions for online hate speech, tighter controls on home-schooling, limits on donations to religious groups from abroad, and a requirement for all associations in France receiving public funding to sign a contract pledging to respect Republican values. Among the more than 70 separate articles, the law expands the ability of the French State to close places of worship and religious schools, as well as ban preachers it deems “extremist.”

Second, rising Islamic extremism and politicization of the attacks. The bill was introduced by Macron in the backdrop of a series of attacks with the recent being in October 2020 when a teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded for showing his pupils the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. Paty's killing prompted the inclusion of the specific crimes of online hate speech in the bill. His beheading by an 18-year-old Muslim Russian refugee of Chechen ethnicity bore the hallmarks of a similar attack on the French magazine Charlie Hebdo. In 2015, the office of Hebdo was attacked, for creating these comic strips on the Prophet. Hebdo has remained one event where the French *laïcité* (secularism) was in direct conflict with one's religious norms and the beheading of Paty further deepened the social conflict. Macron has since politicised the attacks and called Islam to be in crisis. His bill has the public support as Paty is seen as a symbol of French free-thinking that has been attacked by the Islamic radicals.

Third, a colonial idea of *laïcité* challenged in a multicultural French society. French society has witnessed a slow social integration of its Muslim population. The post-colonial French society is multicultural and yet one of its communities, the Muslims, today still live as ethnically ghettoized as in the colonial period. Also, France follows a strict separation of religion and state, formalized through Art 1 of its constitution, wherein to be a French secular means absence of religious symbol in public space. However, the contemporary interpretation of *laïcité* has been illiberal and its politicisation only meant increasing anxiety towards Islam. The public discourse fuelled by political leaders has been a public prohibition towards headscarf irrespective of whether the person is a public servant or not. France has remained colour-blind but the Muslims in France are not the French Muslims. This identity crisis and what it means to be a French today is further convoluted by the bill which sees France and its republic values at odds with Islam.

Fourth, the French state and propagation of civic liberalism. French nationalism itself is defined by civic expression of its liberalism. This French liberalism has propelled the State to defend these values through strict policing and the bill has been the likely extension. Macron and Darmanin have been particularly accused of seeing a whole marginalized community through the acts of few and pandering them as a threat. The passage of the bill would legalize what Macron calls the development of a “counter-society” that rejects secularism.

In perspective

First, the anti-separatism bill is yet to be adopted as law and since its drafting, the term ‘separatism’ remains problematic. With no legal definition to the term, its fuzziness could probably be a case for more abuse from the State. Today one reads in every French newspaper how a cloth (hijab) or type of meat (halal) are signs of social separatism which could be legalised through State action.

Second, with Macron passing the bill, he could formalize the ground for the popularity of the political right. With campaigning ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections, the right-

wing opposition Republicans (LR) party and the far-right National Rally have both called for more restrictions on Islamism and garner the public mandate.

Nepal: Protest against a new law needing consent for women to travel abroad

In the news

On 10 February, the Department of Immigration in Nepal proposed a new law wherein women under 40 years of age would have to seek consent from the family and the ward office to travel abroad on a visit visa. "This girls/women in this age group are at a higher risk of human trafficking and other abuses. The new rule is proposed for their protection," said Tek Narayan Paudel, a spokesperson of the Department to Nepal daily Kathmandu Post. The proposal has triggered a widespread women's protests which led the department, later in the week, to clarify that the provision was only applicable to those travelling alone for the first time to the Gulf or Africa.

The protest against the proposal now coincides with a larger demand for safeguards of the rights of the woman in the country. Since 8 February, hundreds have rallied in Kathmandu demanding the conviction of the perpetrators in Bhagirathi Bhatta's rape and her subsequent murder. The protest programme led by students of Padmakanya Campus was organised as part of the ongoing Brihat Nagarik Andolan, a campaign protesting against Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's House dissolution move.

Issues at large

First, the rationale behind the administration's decision. The government's protectionist approach denies women their right to earn. In 1985, the Foreign Employment Act prohibited recruiters from providing jobs to women without the consent of guardians. In 1988, the Act was amended to include permission from guardians as well as the government. The latest proposal adds to an existing series of legal restrictions on travel for women. Even after the clarification, it discounts women's contribution to Nepal's migrant-led-economy. The rationale of the administration to tighten the women trafficker's network, turns a blind eye to the larger deplorable conditions of the Nepali migrant workers (across gender) in their workplace over the years, ranging from being underpaid to getting laid off illegally to even their death.

Second, deeply entrenched patriarchal society. The protest is a stark reminder of the patriarchy, the culture of impunity, rising rape cases and silent trafficking networks in the country. Nepal is still a highly patriarchal society where caste and class of both the victim and the perpetrators provides impunity from justice. It's widely reported that victims of sexual assault are being prevented from seeking legal action in the name of local "settlement" and "reconciliation" involving community elders. Similarly, it took a decade for Nepal to legally ban the menstrual huts but not the social practice. This entrenched patriarchal mindset of feminine inferiority makes state institutions hesitant to investigate cases of violence and in turn adopt a protectionist approach to control attacks on women. While all along, trafficking of women for various labours including prostitution have continued. According to the annual human trafficking report of the National Human Rights Commission for 2018-19, nearly 1.5 million Nepalis of which 15000 women are at the risk of trafficking.

Third, civil society pressure. Weak criminal investigations, attempts by officials to protect perpetrators and the politicization of rape cases have led the civil society groups, amid the political crises, to pressurise the government to act. The proposal has been the fallout. Since

2020, around 2,144 rape cases have been registered with the Nepal police and the judiciary convicts sexual assault perpetrators a prison term of seven to 25 years. The National Women Commission has remained defunct since 2017 and political leaders apathetic to women issues. Similarly, Nepal's constitution, promulgated in 2015, has barred handing off death penalty making it difficult to prosecute convicts with harsh laws.

In perspective

Travelling on visit visas probably makes women vulnerable to abuse. But in a larger duty of the State to protect, the authorities have blind-sided the reasons for which women migrate and missed the opportunity to make applications for an employment visa more transparent. In the past, the State's protectionist approach has failed to yield expected results as women have continued to go abroad through illegal routes and face abuse while being trafficked. The particular proposal increases the risk of incidents where sub-agents and traffickers could lure women more to trafficking and defeats the rationale of the State.

Afghanistan: Surging targeted killing amid troop withdrawal discussions

In the news

On 17 February, the Taliban published an open letter urging the United States to remain committed to the Doha agreement regarding the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan. The letter signed by Taliban's deputy leader Mullah Abdullah Abdul Ghani Baradar stated, "We are fully confident that the Afghans themselves can achieve the establishment of an Islamic government and enduring peace and security through intra-Afghan dialogue." Similarly, in a message to the NATO leaders, the Taliban said, "Our message to the upcoming NATO ministerial meeting is that the continuation of occupation and war is neither in your interest nor in the interest of your and our people."

On 15 February, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in a pre-ministerial press conference reiterated that the presence of the alliance's troops in Afghanistan is "conditions-based," saying "we will not leave before the time is right." On the same day, Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, stated, "At this moment, the Taliban has taken a hard stance, which unfortunately is not helping the situation."

On 15 February, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released a report in which it stated that 65 journalists, media professionals and human rights defenders were killed in Afghanistan between 1 January 2018 and 31 January 2021, with 11 losing their lives since the start of negotiations in September 2020. Further, the report also documented a "changing patterns" of attacks as it identified the recent killings as an intentional, premeditated and deliberate targeting of individuals with perpetrators remaining anonymous.

Issues at large

First, the question of troop withdrawal. Presently, there are roughly 8,000 NATO troops and nearly 2,500 US troops in Afghanistan. While the Taliban has voiced its strong opposition to the presence of international troops in Afghanistan, the Afghan government expects the continued support of the alliance in its train, advice and assist mission. However, as the new US administration under President Joe Biden is reviewing the Doha agreement signed with the Taliban in February 2020, according to which the US pledged to withdraw all international troops by April 2021, the question of complete troop withdrawal remains in question.

Second, surging violence and targeted killing. Despite the ongoing negotiation, violent conflict continues unabated across Afghanistan. Apart from the UNAMA report, TOLO News, a local news agency has stated that 340 people were either killed or wounded in security incidents in Afghanistan since the start of February 2021 as a result of magnetic IEDs, roadside bombs and targeted killings.

Third, the stalled intra-Afghan negotiations. The negotiations in Doha been stalled for almost four weeks as both sides have not held meetings on the agenda of the second phase of the Intra-Afghan dialogue which started on 5 January. The Taliban's missing presence in Doha is one of the main reasons behind the deadlock.

In perspective

First, the presence of international troops has not curbed the surge in violence, however, this does not mean that the troops should leave. The continuing presence of the US and NATO forces has helped prevent the Taliban from tilting the balance of power on the ground in its favour. Further, it has also helped curb hard-line armed groups from exploiting the security vacuum that may arise. Thus, the Biden administration will have some difficult decisions to take, however, it is unlikely that there will be a complete withdrawal of troops given the situation in Afghanistan and the status of the negotiations.

Second, violence is a manifestation of the stalled negotiations that have seen limited progress and vague statements from both sides. Further, it shows that the two sides have failed to reach a consensus on the most important and first agenda of the talks which is the call for a reduction in violence.

Third, the US-Taliban agreement and intra-Afghan negotiations provide a singular opportunity to bring peace to war-torn Afghanistan. However, with the Taliban prioritising the Doha agreement over the intra- Afghan talks the opportunity seems to be slipping away.

Ethiopia: Instability persists with continuing violence, jailed opposition leaders, and closure of refugee camps

In the news

On 14 February, Nation reported that at least 28 people were killed and dozens injured in the conflict-hit Tigray region during the anti-government protests which started on 8 February; Ethiopian forces allegedly used live bullets against the protesters.

On 13 February, Aljazeera reported that the condition of jailed Oromo opposition leaders who have been on a hunger strike since 27 January deteriorated; four leaders were taken to the hospital after they collapsed.

On 11 February, the Director-General of Ethiopia's Agency for Refugees and Returnees Affairs announced the closure of two Eritrean refugee camps citing the impact of the Tigray conflict on the two. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) said the two camps had been destroyed and the refugees displaced.

Issues at large

First, the uncertainties surrounding the Tigray conflict. Hundred days after the Ethiopian government launched an offensive into Tigray on 4 November 2020, the uncertainties regarding the political developments in the region persist. After Ethiopia declared an end to the conflict on 28 November, many leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) have gone into hiding but have also vowed to continue resistance. Further, since Ethiopia had also imposed an emergency on Tigray prior to the conflict, information from the region has been difficult to verify.

Second, the multiple crises in Ethiopia. Even before the Tigray crisis began in November 2020, Ethiopia started to witness political and ethnic unrest. For example, the above-mentioned opposition leaders were jailed on grounds of inciting riots following the assassination of popular singer-activist Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020. Similarly, other instances ethnic conflicts - like the massacre of over 200 in the Benishangul-Gumuz region in western Ethiopia - have taken place over the last few months.

Third, the creeping authoritarianism. Ahmed came to power in 2018 on the promise of reformist and inclusive politics, after the Oromo ethnic group protested against the TPLF-led federal government for sidelining other ethnic groups. However, over time, Ahmed has reflected an authoritarian approach by jailing opposition leaders, journalists critical of the government, and imposing frequent internet shutdowns.

Fourth, the worsening humanitarian conditions. Since the conflict in Tigray escalated, humanitarian agencies including the UN, have been calling on the government to provide unhindered access to the region, especially to the two Eritrean camps, as relief supplies were scarce.

In perspective

First, the multiple political and ethnic crises do little to help Ahmed gain the support of Ethiopians. Ahmed's reluctance to hold any dialogue with opposition figures leads to increased resentment among the population. In the current atmosphere, it is unlikely that Ahmed will succeed in establishing the inclusive governance he once promised. However, the previous regime too has shaped the current state of affairs as it did not leave much space for Ahmed to reverse the authoritarian past of Ethiopia.

Second, a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in the Tigray region, the scale of which remains unknown as the government is controlling information from the region and also dismissing independent reports or claims made by journalists or aid organisations.

Also, from around the world

By Apoorva Sudhakar and Abigail Miriam Fernandez

Peace and Conflict from East and Southeast Asia

China: NYT reveals Utsul community as latest target of CPC campaign against foreign influence

On 14 February, The New York Times reported that Utsuls, a Muslim community with a population of 10,000, in the Hainan island are the latest targets of the "Chinese Communist Party's campaign against foreign influence and religions." Some of the measures taken against the Utsuls include replacing sign boards reading "Allahu Akbar" with "China Dream" stickers, removal of halal signs at restaurants and closure of Islamic schools and banning

headscarves frequently. However, the Utsul community has sometimes carried out protests against the targeting.

Thailand: Court of Appeal denies bail to four leaders

On 15 February, the Thailand Court of Appeal dismissed a plea to release four leaders of the Ratsadon Group. The Court held the four protests leaders had tarnished the monarchy. On the same day, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha warned that violence will lead to more bloodshed, which will be bad for the whole country. His statement came after anti-government protests turned violent on 13 February, wherein the protesters said if the government does not release the four leaders within a week, they would hold another rally on 20 February.

South Korea: Lee-Yong soo calls for taking Japan's wartime sex slavery issue to ICJ

On 16 February, Lee Yong-soo, one of the survivors of Japan's sex slavery during the Second World War, said the issue should be taken up to the International Court of Justice. She cited that Japan had been unresponsive to a South Korean court's verdict in favour of the women. She said, "I plead with the government to hold Japan accountable under the international law...I hope the two nations resolve the issue permanently at the international court and live-in peace with each other." She reiterated that the survivors wanted an acknowledgement and apology from Japan, not financial reparations.

New Zealand: Tired of having Australia export its problems, says Ardern

On 16 February, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern criticised Australia for cancelling the citizenship of Suhayra Aden, a suspected ISIS terrorist wanted with a 'blue notice.' Aden, who was born in New Zealand moved to Australia at the age of six. On 15 February, she, along with her two children, was reported to have been captured trying to illegally cross the Syrian border and was detained by Turkey. Arden said New Zealand "is tired of having Australia export its problems" but would consider the issue because of the children. Meanwhile, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison defended Australia's decision claiming that national security interests are his primary concerns.

New Zealand: Air New Zealand comes under the scanner to deal with Saudi Arabia

On 13 February, Oxfam said a USD three million contract signed by Air New Zealand to repair engine components for Saudi Arabian vessels "is an unacceptable breach of international obligations and New Zealanders' trust." This indirectly fuels war crimes in Yemen. Following the revelation, PM Ardern ordered an inquiry into the matter. Further, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade is also looking into the issue. According to 1 News, Air New Zealand, had been open about its contracts with the US and Australia, but not about its dealings with Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Myanmar: Suu Kyi faces a second charge during a closed-door trial; military suspends privacy laws

On 16 February, Aung San Suu Kyi's lawyer said the military charged her under the Natural Disaster Management law during a closed-door trial. She has been accused of violating COVID-19 guidelines. Previously, Suu Kyi was charged for allegedly importing walkie-talkies. If convicted of these charges, Suu Kyi could face six years in prison. Along with Suu Kyi, former President Win Myint has also been charged under the Natural Disaster Management law. Meanwhile, on 14 February, the military suspended three sections of the country's privacy laws. The suspension of these sections threatens the protection of citizens against detention without warrant, removes constraints on security forces' to search private property, and allows for spying on communications.

Myanmar: China, Russia withdraw from UNHRC resolution

On 12 February, China and Russia withdrew from a UN Human Rights Council resolution on the developments in Myanmar. The UNHRC pushed for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint and others. The UN Special Rapporteur condemned the detention of the leaders and the alleged use of live bullets against the protesters. Meanwhile, Nepal and Hong Kong accused China of causing civil unrest in Myanmar.

Peace and Conflict from South Asia

India: 22-year-old climate activist arrested for sharing “Toolkit” related to the farmers’ protest

On 13 February, Disha Ravi, a 22-year-old climate activist was arrested in Bengaluru after she was accused of sedition and conspiracy by the Delhi Police in the Toolkit case. The Delhi police stated that Ravi is a key conspirator in the case as she is admitted to editing something on the online document before sharing it in the initial interrogation. Her arrest has created outrage from both civil society and political leaders who have criticised the Delhi Police as “unwarranted harassment, unfortunate and shocking.”

India- China: Disengagement continues along the south bank of Pangong lake

On 16 February, the Indian Army released multiple videos and images showing the continued process of disengagement between China and India along the banks of Pangong lake area in eastern Ladakh. From Pangong South Bank, the Chinese withdrew 130-140 tanks, 30 artillery guns and 2,000 troops. From Pangong North Bank, 30 artillery guns and some 4,000-5,000 troops were withdrawn by the Chinese. This development is seen as a breakthrough after the forces of both sides were involved in a face-off on this area for nearly a year.

India: Nepal and Sri Lanka react to Tripura chief minister’s remarks

On 15 February, in reaction to the chief minister of Tripura, Biplab Kumar Deb statements, Chairman of the Election Commission of Sri Lanka stated that a political party of a foreign country cannot be established in the country under any circumstances. Similarly, Nepal’s Ambassador to India made a phone call to Joint Secretary in-charge of Nepal and Bhutan to expressed concern over the “objectionable remarks” made by the chief minister. Previously, Deb mentioned plans to extend the Bharatiya Janata Party’s base, claiming that Union Home Minister Amit Shah stated that the BJP is “planning to form its government in neighbouring countries, including Nepal and Sri Lanka.”

India: Delegation of foreign envoys arrives in J&K

On 17 February, 24 foreign envoys arrived in Srinagar to take stock of the ground situation in Jammu and Kashmir. The delegation includes envoys from several Latin American, African, and European countries. They were first taken to Magam block of Budgam district and briefed about the Panchyati Raj system and grievance redressal system; they also interacted with the local population. On 18 February, the envoys are expected to meet the recently elected members of the District Development Council in Jammu.

Bangladesh: Five Islamist extremists sentenced to death for the murder of blogger

On 16 February, a Special Anti-Terrorism Tribunal sentenced five Islamist extremists to death and one man to life in prison over the murder of Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi-American writer and rights activist. The Public Prosecutor stated that the six men convicted belong to the al-Qaeda-inspired armed group Ansar Ullah Bangla Team, which police say was behind the murders of many secular activists and bloggers. This verdict comes less than a week after eight Islamist extremists were sentenced to death for the murder of a publisher who brought out books by secular writers, including two by Roy. In 2015, Roy was hacked to death outside Bangladesh’s largest book fair by machete-wielding extremists.

Pakistan: Officials open to the idea of US forces staying in Afghanistan

On 14 February, senior officials stated that Pakistan is not opposed to the idea of the US-led international forces extending their stay in Afghanistan until a political deal is reached through intra-Afghan talks. Further, the official stated, “While we want every side to stick to the deal, Pakistan desires orderly and responsible withdrawal of the US and other international forces,” adding, “The key here is not to repeat the mistakes of the past.” Further, the official stated, “While we want every side to stick to the deal, Pakistan desires orderly and responsible withdrawal of the US and other international forces.”

Afghanistan: Hekmatyar blames Afghan Govt and the US for stalled talks

On 14 February, Hizb-e-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar blamed the Afghan government and the US for the deadlock in the Doha negotiations. He said that the United States has “failed” in its fight against the Taliban while calling the incumbent government “occupied.” He added, “the US has no option or alternative except withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan.” In response, political leaders across Afghanistan criticised Hekmatyar for his statement. Abdullah Abdullah, head of the High Council for National Reconciliation, termed the statements as “the language of threat and insult,” saying such talk “doesn’t work” in Afghanistan and it is not what the people expect from their political leaders.

Peace and Conflict from Central Asia, Middle East and Africa

Kyrgyzstan: Protest erupt after Court rules against jail time for former customs officer

On 14 February, civilians took to the streets demanding action against widespread corruption. The protesters condemned a Bishkek Court verdict which “ordered a mitigated punishment and no jail time” for Raimbek Matraimov, a former customs official who was sanctioned by the US for his role in illegally funnelling hundreds of millions of dollars out of the country. On 11 February, the Court placed a fine on Matraimov to pay a fine of USD 3000. The Court observed he had paid back USD 24 million. However, the protesters demanded his arrest and reiterated that they were protesting for a bright future.

Iran: Tehran threatens to suspend snap IAEA inspections

On 15 February, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson said Iran will suspend the snap inspections by the IAEA if the rest of the signatories of the JCPOA do not fulfil their obligations. Referring to the US, he said, “It does not mean ending all inspections by the U.N. nuclear watchdog... All these steps are reversible if the other party changes its path and honours its obligations.” Iran’s envoy to the IAEA tweeted that he had conveyed the same to the nuclear watchdog.

Iraq: One killed, eight injured in a rocket attack in Kurdistan

On 15 February, a foreigner was killed and eight others injured after a volley of rockets targeted a US airbase in Iraq’s Kurdistan. A Shia group called Awliyaa al-Dam claimed responsibility for the same. The group said, “The American occupation will not be safe from our strikes in any inch of the homeland, even in Kurdistan, where we promise we will carry out other qualitative operations.” The US and Iraqi forces accuse such small militia groups of being a front for pro-Iran factions.

Syria: Six fighters killed in an Israeli missile attack

On 15 February, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that six-Iran backed fighters were killed when Israel launched several missiles targeting the capital, Damascus. The Observatory said the missiles hit the Syrian Army’s Fourth Division close in the mountains close to the highway connecting Damascus and Beirut. According to the state-run news agency,

SANA, said the missiles were launched from the Golan Heights and Syria managed to take down most of them.

Yemen: UN calls for de-escalation as Houthis launch an offensive in against Marib

On 16 February, the UN undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs said an assault in Marib would impact nearly two million people and lead to the displacement of thousands; this could have “unimaginable humanitarian consequences.” On the same day, Houthi-run Al Masirah television reported 13 airstrikes on Marib, an oil-rich region. Therefore, the Houthis had not targeted Marib until recently. However, in February, the Houthis started their offensive against Marib. Currently, the death toll has not been ascertained though hundreds are believed to have succumbed.

Yemen: UN agencies warn of acute malnutrition among children

On 12 February, the FAO, WFP, WHO and UNICEF released a joint report warning that “hundreds of thousands of young children in Yemen risk dying from severe acute malnutrition” in 2021 if they do not receive immediate treatment. The report said, 2.3 million children, all under five years of age, were at the risk of acute malnutrition. Of this, 400,000 children are likely to suffer from severe acute malnutrition, - the most extreme form of undernutrition - which, if untreated, can result in death.

Sudan: Government declares emergency in seven regions

On 16 February, The Guardian reported that Sudan had declared states of emergency in seven regions after protests against rising food prices turned violent; buildings were burned and markets were looted. On 11 February, security forces had arrested as many as 300 people, including the former Vice President, who were protesting against the rising prices of essential commodities, especially bread, fuel, and power.

Nigeria: One killed; dozens abducted as gunmen raid school

On 16 February, one student was killed and over 40 others, including teachers, were abducted by suspected armed bandits in the Niger state. As many as 26 students, 16 staff members and their family members have been abducted. On the same day, President Muhammadu Buhari condemned the incident and directed armed forces to ensure the return of all abductees.

The Sahel: G5 summit concludes, Macron says will not reduce troops

On 16 February, the G5 Sahel summit, consisting of the Great five - Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania - along with their allies concluded. French President Emmanuel Macron dismissed speculations of troop drawdown and said a rushed exit will be a mistake. Instead, he said, France will launch other operations in collaboration with Chadian, Malian, and Mauritanian troops. Further, he also said French troops will be adjusted in accordance with the involvement of other countries in the Tabuka Task Force which aims to divide France’s military activities between other European countries.

Peace and Conflict from Europe and the Americas

Catalonia elections: Pro-independence parties wins an absolute majority

On 14 February, three pro-independence parties secured over half of the vote in elections for the first time, winning 74 of the 135 seats. Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez’s Socialist Party won the most votes; however, he would need the support from the separatists to form a coalition. Further, this is the first-time pro-independence parties took more than half the votes, winning 51 per cent. This election comes almost three-and-a-half years after the pro-independence regional government of the then president Carles Puigdemont pushed Spain into its worst political crisis in decades.

Russia: Navalny supporters hold Valentine's Day protests

On 14 February, pro- Navalny supporters held candle-lit gatherings in residential courtyards across Russia despite warnings that they could be arrested. The demonstrators stood outside for 15 minutes with flashlights or candle, and post it on social media under the hashtag "Love is stronger than fear." On the same day, another activist called on women to form a human chain in Moscow in support of Navalny's wife Yulia. The demonstrations took place despite the Navalny's allies declaring a moratorium on street rallies until the spring.

The US: Seven Republican senators voted in favour of convicting Trump

On 13 February, seven Republican senators voted along with the Democrats to convict former President Donald Trump in his second impeachment trial. However, the vote of 57 to 43 fell short of the two-thirds majority needed to find him guilty of inciting the Capitol riot. Soon after the verdict, Trump sent out a statement reiterating the "witch hunt" that is being waged upon him by his enemies. On the same day, the House managers made an abrupt demand to hear from witnesses who could testify to what Trump was doing and saying during the riots, the Senate voted to allow the investigation.

The US: Power outage after winter storm makes its way across the country

On 15 February, millions of people remained without power as a deadly winter storm made its way across the southern and central parts of the United States. Temperatures across the middle of the country had plummeted to all-time lows. At least 23 people have died since the storm, with almost four million across the country remained without electricity of which 3.5 million of those outages were in Texas. The storm seems to have defied a trend of ever-milder winters, but the frigid temperatures in Texas could be a consequence of global warming.

Ecuador: Electoral body orders partial recount over disputed presidential polls

On 13 February, the National Electoral Council (CNE) in Ecuador announced that it will conduct a partial recount of 7 February presidential polls after meeting between two presidential candidates still contesting for second place. The electoral body stated that there would be "a recount of 100 per cent of the votes in the Guayas province" which is the most populous province in the country and a recount of 50 per cent of the votes in 16 other provinces. Further, the United Nations has called for "transparency and promptness" in a vote recount.

Honduras: US prosecutors to investigate President Hernández for accepting drug-related bribes

On 12 February, US prosecutors are investigating the president of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernández according to a new court filing. This latest filing is part of the criminal case of a Honduran drug trafficker, Geovanny Fuentes Ramirez, who prosecutors say paid Hernández large bribes to fund the Honduran leader's 2013 presidential campaign in exchange for protection of his drug business. However, Hernández has repeatedly denied any ties to drug cartels. Further, the filing is the first scenario in which US prosecutors have made public that they are investigating the president.

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